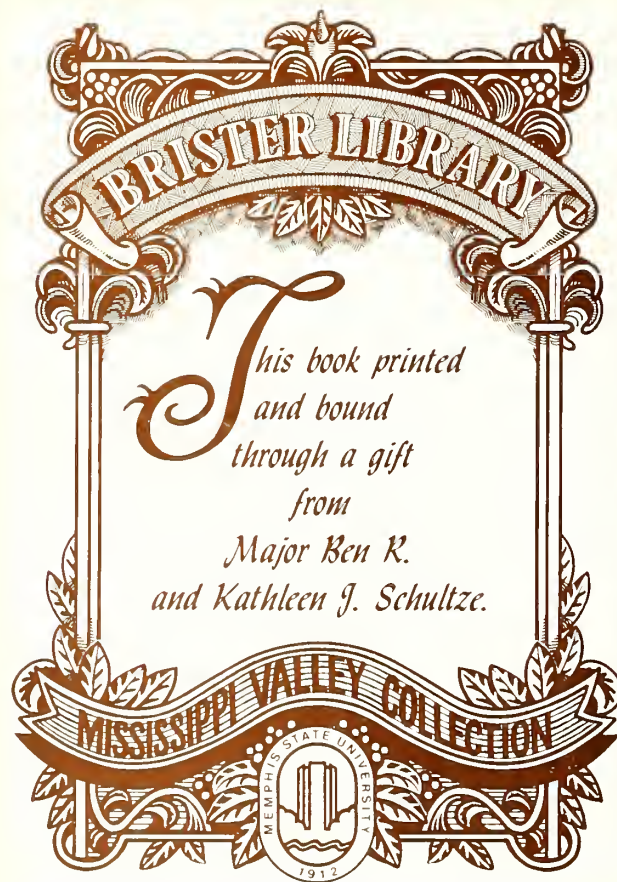


AN ORAL HISTORY OF WOMEN LEADERS IN MEMPHIS  
INTERVIEW WITH PATRICAL WALKER SHAW

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"An Interview With Patricia Walker Shaw"

DECEMBER 12, 1979

Dianne Wells

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November 13, 1988

TO: Michele Fagan  
FROM: Charles Crawford *Charles W. Crawford*

We are enclosing the manuscript and tape of an interview conducted on December 12, 1979, by Eleanor McKay, at that time Curator of the Mississippi Valley Collection, with Patricia Walker Shaw in the "Women Leaders in Memphis" Oral history Project.

Mrs. Shaw understood that the interview was to be included in the Mississippi Valley Collection, but she died before we obtained the usual release form from her.

I am therefore releasing the interview for use when it is bound and added to your collection.



This is the transcript of an interview I did with Mrs. Patricia Walker Shaw,  
m/2-12-1979 in Memphis.

It is done in the form of an oral history, as explained to me by Eleanor McKay  
of the Mississippi Valley Collection, in which Mrs. Shaw did all the talking.

The experience proved to be very interesting and I'm sorry that our time was  
so short. After we had finished, she made a few comments. One was that Memphians,  
both black and white, need to get together and realize that our city isn't all that  
bad and that if we all work together it can only get better. I feel that this  
interview gave me a great many insights into the life of a successful black woman.





"An Interview with Patricia Walker Shaw"

"My name is Patricia Walker Shaw and I was born in Little Rock, Ark. However, I do consider myself to be a native Memphian. I was born in Little Rock because there was little, if any, good care available in City of Memphis Hospitals and my mother had a black physician who was not allowed to practice in a private hospital. So, since my mother is a native 'Little Rockian' and her father was a physician he delivered me. So, about the time she thought I was ready to come, we went to Little Rock and my grandfather delivered me and we stayed there a few weeks until my mother could travel. Once that was over, however, we came back to Memphis and I grew up here. Growing up in Memphis was a very interesting experience, especially during the time period in which I grew up, I'm forty years old, and during that time Memphis was an entirely segregated city. All of our experiences were within the black community. We went to church a few blocks from home, we went to public schools a few blocks from home, and played within a few blocks of home. Ours was a very sheltered kind of existence. And I think that had a lot to do with the fact that my parents didn't want me to have to face being prejudiced against as a very young child. So my parents, like many other parents, kept us sequestered right in walking distance or very near walking distance of our home. It was also interesting because in order for us to get to know other people, even black people, there were a lot of things that sprung up that were concentrated on getting folks to know other folks, maybe across town or something like that, various social clubs or young folk activities. It was a very contrived kind of existence for me. The school system was good and the teachers were loving and interested, they just did not have the facilities that were necessary for a well-rounded kind of public education at that time. By the time that I was ready to enter high school, my parents felt that it would be more to my advantage to go away to school. So, at the age of thirteen I went away to prep school in New York...Poughkeepsie, New York. The school was Oakwood School in New York and it was a small, about 200 students, Quaker operated institution. It was my first experience with spending that much time with white people and certainly the whole Quaker influence was different from any I had been



familiar with at that time. I must have been there about two weeks before I got over my feelings of being homesick and, actually, those were four of the best years of my life. It was the kind of experience that I don't think I ever would have gotten. It gave me a sense of independence...any thirteen year old coming from Memphis who has to find their way from LaGuardia Airport all the way to the train station for Poughkeepsie by oneself keeping up with one's money, one's baggage, and all that, really gave me a sense of independence and like I said, I did that for four years. It was a very good experience. My parents felt that once I had had that kind of experience, I should go to a black college. Even though I had, like my other classmates, wanted to go to a tough sort of Brown, or Bennington or somewhere in that area, because that's where all my classmates were going, it was impressed upon me that I needed some experience in getting along with black people too since this was what I was going to do. So, in 1956, I enrolled in Fisk University in Nashville, TN. I enjoyed those years at Fisk, and although my parents only wanted me to go there for two years and then I could go anywhere I wanted, once I got there I kind of liked it. It's a small Liberal Arts College so it wasn't as overwhelming as one would think a school could be after coming from a very small prep school. And my sophomore year I met my now husband and after two years I didn't want to leave him there and I also didn't want to put down the experience and so I stayed. I did an exchange program at University of Michigan for a year. It started out to be a year but ended up being only half a year because I just didn't like it. There were as many people in my dorm at Michigan as there were in the whole school at Fisk. I missed that whole closeness and also I was the only woman in the school of business at Michigan. By that time I had decided my major would be business and along with being the only woman, my major separated me from the rest of the school and liberal arts courses. So, my contacts were limited again and I felt there was no point in my not giving myself a chance to be young. So, I finished at Fisk in 1960 in Business Administration and finished Cum laude.





After I had left Fisk I had got a scholarship-in those days they gave on the basis of ability, which is very difficult to get these days-to the University of Chicago. I worked on my Masters in business at University of Chicago for one year. Then I got married. Then I decided, because it was more important in those days than a career, and I was raised in those days. So, that gives you a little bit of an idea about my background. Growing up during that time, that was before this great human cry for civil rights, and it all started-- Dr. King started his drive--I was in college by then. Growing up during that time placed a great burden on those of us who are middle aged now. We had learned to exist in kind of a shadowy existence and unduly some people suffered psychologically. Once integration and civil rights were pushed for we had to learn to operate at a whole different level. So this, I think had a great impact on my life having to come from 'don't make too many waves and kind of be quiet and don't pay too much attention to wanting these things just kind of keep to yourself' to 'where the sky is the limit and not only do you talk about opportunities but you have them'. And this was especially in my field, in business administration, because there were very few blacks who were in the school of business, I think I was the only one at Chicago during that time, in the 60's. And then along comes this thing that says you're free and you can go to the zoo any time you want to and go to the fair any time you want to, and it was just a whole bombardment to the psychological development of people my age because we had to learn to function in a whole different kind of way. I didn't even think about the whole point of being a woman, about it being difficult being a woman, because all of our energies concentrated on how to make it in black-white kind of a world. So, it was really something I had to unlearn during this period after school even until the early 70's. We had to unlearn almost twenty years of how to deport oneself when one was in



mixed company. Mixed being black and white. I got into the business of social work because there were no opportunities for me with a B.A. degree in Business Administration, being black and being female in that day and age. I wanted to work for the company, Universal, because I had been raised with that all my life. My paternal grandfather was a physician in Mississippi and he didn't like that too much. He had put himself through med school but it really wasn't a comfortable occupation for a blackman in Mississippi in the early 20's. So, he just wasn't really satisfied with it and I don't know if he was born with it or what but he always had a knack for finances. He got together with some other blacks in Indianola, Mississippi, and they formed a bank. They did a lot of financing for black farmers in that area. It was the Delta Penny Savings Bank. From these blacks who were interested and had some money enough to put in this kind of thing developed Mississippi Life Insurance Co. which was the black insurance company in Mississippi. I guess he was always a real idol of mine, my grandfather, because he never was willing to take a back seat for anything and the more successful he became in the life insurance and banking business, the more disliked he was by his white counterparts in Indianola. He virtually left under the dark of night taking my father and his sister and my grandmother out of Mississippi. He fled the city because there were too many jealousies and people threatened his life with regard to his financial success. So, in 1921, he moved to Memphis and virtually started all over again. He was determined he was not going to be a physician because he enjoyed the other so much and plus there was a need, white insurance companies would not insure black lives. This was because the mortality





was admittedly and still is higher for blacks than it is for whites. That's because people didn't have the kind of medical care and the kind of diet that meant good life. So, white insurance companies would not insure black lives nor would they allow black people to work for them in those days. And he knew there was a need. And that if you made money by selling life insurance or health insurance then you had money to invest in the community. This was the kind of thing he was imbued with almost to the point of thinking of nothing else. He wanted to best serve black people and he felt this was better than dragging through the mud in a carriage delivering babies and thing like this. This was just not his thing but it was also the only career opportunity available to him where he felt he could get the kind of training to serve. He hadn't even thought about the financial side of it. So, he came to Memphis and started another life insurance company which was Universal Life Insurance Company in 1923. It took him a couple of years to get the money and make the contacts and this kind of thing. Universal was started in 1923 and eventually Tri-State Bank was started in 1943 or '44.

It thrived here and this was during the Crump machine which was very interesting and he (my grandfather) had a very good relationship with Crump. Crump did not seem to mind blacks doing their own thing as long as they did it over there. As long as they voted and as long as they did it over there and didn't bother anybody else. So, they had a very good relationship and it was the protective kind of relationship that you get in those kind of autocratic mayoralities. He used it because



if Boss Crump said it was okay nobody was going to bother you. The same kind of pressures that were present in Indianola just were not here in Memphis. And the company thrived. My father finished at the University of Michigan and that's probably why I chose to do an exchange program there. He graduated as the third black actuary in the country. Actuary Science is the study of Math and Probability. It forms the basis for how you build a life insurance premium. Do you charge enough to take care of the risk? At the time that he graduated he was the third black actuary in the country. Because he was black he was not permitted to take the actuarial exam. These were the professional exams you take to get the professional designation behind your name. It was a Fellow of Actuary Science and he was not permitted to do this. He always knew he wanted to work at the company so he came back after he finished. He had a M.B.A. from Columbia, and then he went to Michigan and got an Actuary degree in Actuary Science. He too had finished Fisk. So, he ended up with three degrees and came back here really prepared. His father had done it out of guts and determination he was well trained for that kind of thing. So, you can see, life insurance has been in my blood for a long time and I don't think it was ever discussed what I was going to major in. It was almost a foregone fact. I'm the oldest child and one of two girls. My brother is seven years younger than I am. It was never discussed what I was going to major in although I wasn't particularly good in math. Business is not necessarily math so nobody ever thought about it. So, anyway I came





through. It was also interesting to me when people started talking about black power that it was a concept that they had to learn to deal with and I had been dealing with it all along. By the time I knew anything we <sup>were</sup> banking black and had a black company and appreciation for black professionals and this kind of thing. And it was something that my family did not have to particularly go rediscover. It was something that was already a part of our lives and something we were already living. But I could not find a job in Business Administration once I got married and moved away. So I went into social work. I've always liked people and I never really thought about it in a liberal arts college and there you don't get much for real kinds of training, you kind of get a general training. You didn't have to have a degree in anything in particular, all you had to do was pass a test. And so I went to work as a social worker. That was in Chicago in 1961 after I got married. I worked there and then my husband went to Meharry Medical College in Nashville. We moved to Nashville and I again got on with the State of Tennessee. I really enjoyed that. So, I started working on my Masters in social work in Nashville. And the State has this plan, at least they used to have, where they would send you and you would give them back a year for every year that you went to school. I completed one year and Universal, here in Memphis, had a strike. Everybody walked out. There were about 100 employees at that time and all but about 11 clerks walked out. They left the company in a bind. Some of the officers and executive secretaries



were filling in. In order for a life insurance company to survive policies that were written one week had to be issued the next. My father thought that it was time for us to consider whether we wanted to invest our time and effort in a company that my grandfather had founded and that he had worked in. Or if we wanted to be independent, which we were, I was in social work school and my husband was in medical school. So, we made the decision rather quickly that home and the company is probably where our destinies did lie. We wanted to eventually move back here, anyway, and here was the opportunity so we moved back in July of '66. I started using the training that I had gotten previously in business administration. We both started at the bottom. He was a computer operator and I was a keypunch operator. That was in 1966 and by 1972 or 1973, I was placed on the board. I was then promoted to an officer. So, I guess after 6 or 7 years of touching bases and learning what goes on in a life insurance company, my goals and accomplishments were finally realized. I'm presently now Vice-President in charge of claims and records and microfilm and underwriting. I am the first female officer of the company and, I wasn't but I am now, the youngest officer. It's been an interesting experience because life insurance in the business world is basically male. I really didn't think too much about that when I first came because it was expected that one day I would work here. I really hadn't thought too much about being a female. As I got more involved in the business having to touch other life insurance companies, having to do studies and things like this because



at one point I was in research, and I had to go to other companies around the country. I remember ~~one~~ experience particularly well. By myself I had to go to Chicago, I think I must have been in my early thirties. It didn't occur to me until I was actually on the plane, on my way up there, I think that was the first time I had really travelled on my own (made my own travel arrangements; made my contacts with the insurance company with whom I was to see) this was probably going to be a first experience for a lot of people, not just myself. Also for the men I was going to meet and have lunch with and all that. I had two kinds of feelings. One was 'Hey, look at me...big business lady' and the other was 'my goodness, suppose they shut the door in my face, or suppose I'm rejected'. That old feeling of you're not quite good enough that had grown out of that whole prejudiced society I had grown up in. I think its done a lot of blacks like that. Particularly my age where we were made to think maybe we weren't quite on a par with other people. I said well I'm in the air now I can't turn around and go back without the information. It was a good experience for me because life insurance people tend to be very open about each others business anyway, and they were very helpful and at that time we were looking at a system that this company had already installed. I made my appointment and had my briefcase and looked like I had a little bit of sense anyway, and if they were shocked at all, I didn't know it. I pride myself on perception in picking up any body language or any look that everything's not quite right. Actually, that was one of the most comfortable





interviews I had had in a long time. We had lunch and anything that I had wanted to see I was shown. It was a very good experience and it gave me a great sense of self-confidence. I guess my prep school experience and this one helped refuel or rekindle my belief that I was as good as anybody else that I can do any thing I want to. I'm not going to hang back and just wait on life to lay stuff at my feet. I really had to get out and do what I wanted to do. That experience might be considered a turning point for me as far as my business contacts are concerned. My family has always been involved in civic work. My mother was the first black person on the board of Y.W.C.A. in Memphis. She had done a lot of work with Girl Scouts and had helped with the fund for needy children back in the days when that was the first black-white effort to see that public schools was served by every body in the community. My sister was entering first grade just as they were integrating schools back in 1954. My mother became very involved in that. She has been very active here. My father also has been as was my grandfather. I guess that was like handwriting on the wall, if we were going to live here that was part of being a community. Not only working in it but also serving it. We took that responsibility fairly serious. There was no way for us to be their daughter and son-in-law and not extend ourselves. I also think that's why I've had a wealth of experiences. I was supposed to do something with it and not just go to work and go home. When I came there were just small murmurs of blacks trying to reach each other on something other than



an antagonistic basis. In '66, that's just five years after integration had struck Memphis by force and there were a few people both black and white that wanted to kind of reach out to each other. In '66, I'll never forget, everybody had dialouge groups. Everybody was trying to reach out on sme basis. They were at the talking stage--what are you like? what am I like? Five years later we got to live together I've got to see you in the zoo every day instead of you having your own day on Thursday. Eventually people moved from the talking stage to the doing stage. In 1968 is when the Panel of American Women was formed. Someone gave my name to the coordinator, that's like a president, and she contacted me and wanted to know if I wanted to be a member of this group. The panel, I guess we must have started with about twenty or twenty-five women, would have four or five women go out on a panel and these women would talk about how prejpdice had affected their lives. What they were, really, was a first time for churches, civic groups, or any kind of group that were interested in what we had to say. Because we called ourselves The Panel of American Women, it's a national organization that was formed in Kansas City, Kansas, (Missouri) this wonderful lady named Esther Brown, after the Brown vs. the school board case, she needed a brotherhood week program to present to her synogogue. She thought it was a good idea to get a Jew, a Black, a Catholic, and a white Protestant to talk about how prejudice affected their lives.




It was obviously the most fantastic thing that any body had tried to do.

Out of that one little group spread these various Panels of American Women. I think it was started in Kansas City in 1957 but didn't spread here until about 1968.


People really didn't think about it and really weren't ready to hear this. That was a good experience for me. I think it gave me a great deal of self-confidence to go out into a quote 'hostile environment' unquote, and talk about how prejudice had affected my life. And I learned a lot from the other panel members listening to how it had affected them. I think it gave me a broad awareness that maybe we were thinking too narrow when we thought that prejudice was just a black problem. And I think I learned a lot about how prejudice is everybody's problem."







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